# Auto-Suggestion and Elmer Niggle

## *(A Man From Longeddy Tale)*

By MAURICE MORRIS.

"NOW you take the case of Elmer Niggle," said the man from Longeddy. "There is a case in p'int. If he had saw what he didn't see, it wouldn't have hurt him a mite. As 'twas, not seein' it, it was the death of him."

"There's things I can't see that will be the death of me," said old man Ketchum. "But I can hear 'em, ain't no doubt o' that."

"Cur'us a thing as I ever knowed happen in Ulster county," said the man from Longeddy, "and I've knowed some mighty cur'us thing to happen when I was livin' there."

"Huh!" said old man Ketchum.

"This Elmer Niggle I'm tellin' about," said the man from Longeddy, "I knowed from a boy. One of these big headed, gangling boys, he was, that was always outgrowing himself. Consequence was, him bein' an only child an' all, the widder Niggle wouldn't allow him ever to tire himself out—that is, from actially doin' any work. 'Now, don't you overexert yourself, Ophidias,' she'd say. And Ophidias wouldn't."

"Thought you said his name was Elmer," said Tunk Whalley.

"So 'twas. Elmer Ophidias Niggle he was christened. Named after his father, the Great Ophidias. He was a snake charmer with Rooney & Romboid's tent show that Mis' Niggle—Milly Horton she was then—saw one time over at the Manor and fell in love and eloped with. He retired after that and they set up housekeepin' on the Horton place and he brought all his snakes with him and used to give exhibitions, free, of course, sometimes, but in course of time most of the snakes died or got away, all except one, a big, black snake, and——"

"Say, is this a snake lie or a fish lie?" said old man Ketchum.

That was always the way with the old man, starting things and then spending all the rest of his time trying to stop them. If he hadn't come into the store bragging about a bass he'd caught the day before, he wouldn't have been all of an itch then. But he did. "Tell you what, Newt, I caught a black bass yistiddy," he says, "biggest I ever see. Must have weighed——"

### Had He Only Seen!

"Well," says the man from Longeddy, "as long as you see what you catch you're safe. It's when you don't see 'em and can't be checked up, that trouble follers. Now, you take the case of Elmer Niggle. There was a case in p'int. Why, if he had saw what he didn't see he'd be alive to-day. When his father, the Great Ophidias, or Luke Niggle, to give him his real name, died, Elmer was about nineteen. A long spindle shanked, big headed boy, who, Mis' Niggle was always sayin', was in sich a delicate state of health he couldn't do nothin' but loaf around the place or down at the tavern or off fishin' with Chimborazo."

"Chimborazo?" said Lafe Upshaw.

"Yup. Chimborazo was a big black colored snake, the only one left of the Great Ophidias's collection. Elmer had been raised with him from the cradle and they was just like brothers, practically. Great sight to see 'em talking together——"

"Talking!" snorted old man Ketchum.

"Chim twined around Elmer's neck and touchin' his ear with his long, dartin' tongue. They slept in the same bed and wherever Elmer went Chim went, too. If you didn't find 'em off fishin' Goose Creek or the Beaverkill, you'd be sure to find 'em at Tomashek's Tavern, leavin' Mis' Niggle to run the farm. Elmer got quite a repitation as a fisherman, but 'twasn't nuthin' to his repitation as a drinker. It was what Doc Swortwout called an inherited trait. You see, Elmer's father, the Great Ophidias, often got bit by snakes in the course of business. Fact, he used to say, he'd been bit so many times he didn't think nothin' of it when he got a bite, but would just swaller a quart or so of likker and go on with the job. He wouldn't feel the whisky an' neither would he feel the snake bite. They'd kind of counteract each other, an' he'd go on till the next bite happened.

"Well, anyway, whether 'twas what Doc Swartwout said, or not, Elmer could, would and did consume red likker like you would so much water. Why, I've saw him—I jist happened in the tavern once an' see this—I've saw him put away a half gallon demijohn in a couple of hours an' be ready for more later in the day. Of course you could get it in those days."

### A Soothing Influence.

Old man Ketchum breathed deep, and so did two or three others.

"Well, of course, Elmer couldn't keep up that sort of thing for long and not feel it. In a year or so he began seein' things, as the saying is—elephants and idiosyncracies and such. Sometimes he'd bust out——"

"Wonder if this yer fish story's ever goin' to bust out," said old man Ketchum.

"Bust out in the middle of the night and 'twould take all Mis' Niggle and the hired man could do to control him—them and Chimborazo."

"Chimborazo!" said Tunk Whalley.

"Yup. Chimborazo was the most soothin' influence they was. They said 'twas wonderful to see Chim wrap himself in several folds round Elmer and sort o' rub his tail across his forehead. Kind of throw him into a trance and he'd quiet down and come through all right. There ain't any doubt in my mind that Elmer'd be alive to-day if Chim could have lived. But it wasn't to be. One mornin'—I remember it well. I'd gone down to the Horton place to get some of their little green apples that was specially good for flavoring apple sauce—noted in the county them little green apples was. They was several trees in the door yard, and you was welcome to all that dropped, and a lot did. When I got there that mornin' I found Elmer mournin' over the body of Chim, not to say carryin' on somp thing dreadful. The poor blackie had died in the night, and——"

"What did he die of?" asked Lafe Upshaw.

"Well, that I couldn't rightly say for sure, to be strickly ackrit."

"Huh," said old man Ketchum.

"But I always believed the account Elmer gave come clustest to the rights of it," said the man from Longeddy, "and though there was them that pooh-poohed it, still you'll always find some people constituted so they won't believe anything they——"

"Huh," said old man Ketchum.

"See, smell or taste. Not even when it's store cheese that aint bein' paid for though shaved off abstracted like in large size pieces.

"Well, as I was sayin', Elmer said that in the night he'd had one of his fits, only this one was the worst he'd ever had. He thought he was attacked by a swarm of greenish rats, he said, kind of purple eyes they had, he said, and when they started to bite him he screamed so loud it woke up Chim, who was sleepin' by his side as usual. Well, what did that faithful snake do, Elmer said, but come to his rescue. He swallered them rats, one after the other, as fast as he could gulp 'em down, but goin' slower and slower, and on the last one he seemed to choke and, Elmer said, sure enough, when he come to, there was Chim lying——"

"Huh," said old man Ketchum.

"By his side, stone cold."

"Snakes *is* pretty cold, as a rule," said old man Ketchum.

"Well, the queer part of it was," said the man from Longeddy, "that as Chim lay there stretched out full length with Elmer mournin' over him you could see blobs along his body from nose a'most to tail, like a string of sassenges. Seemed kind o' convincin', in a way."

"Why didn't they cut it open and find out?" said Tunk Whalley.

### 'Twould Be Sacrilege.

"Elmer wouldn't hear to that. Somebody did suggest it, but Elmer said 'twould be sacrilege almost, and Mis' Niggle backed him up. Well, to make a long story short——"

"Huh," said old man Ketchum.

"Like Newt's cheese, there, and no wonder," said the man from Long Eddy, "Elmer from that time forrard was a different boy. Old enough to be a man, o' course, he was, but nobody ever thought of him as more'n a boy; at least, I didn't. Wouldn't talk to nobody, Elmer wouldn't, after Chim's death, and would go out of his way to avoid lettin' anybody talk to him. Down to the tavern he'd go, 'most every day, an' get his jug filled, and then off with his fishin' rod moonin' along the stream till late at night. Never seemed to ketch nothin' and never seemed to want to, any more. Wouldn't even perk up when people twitted him on his luck, as lots did.

"He seemed to brace up a little when Mis' Niggle hired the big six horse harvester from over Orange county way to help with the hayin', but that was only temporary. Next day he was back at his old tricks. The last day of the harvester Elmer was gone all day, and he hadn't showed up when it started home that evening. Fact, poor Elmer never showed up again, for next mornin' he was found lyin' crushed to death on the road at the e'end of Gage's wood. Lyin' on his face, he was, and near him on the ground his rod and the queerest lookin' fish you ever see. Good sized fish it was, weighed mebbe five or six pound, but all head a'most, it seemed. Somethin' like a bull pout would look thro' one o' them comic mirrors in the city—great wide mouth, and big, glassy, goggly eyes and a little pinched off tail—all head and mouth and no body, and——"

"What killed Elmer?" said Lafe Upshaw.

"Well, sirs," said the man from Longeddy, "some people said one thing, and some another, but nobody could be sure, and as a matter of fact it's a big mystery to this day. Doc Swartwout o' course had his opinion; but I always thought there was a lot in what Ermentrout Finch said."

"What did he say?" said Lafe Upshaw.

"Erm had a young cousin in the city, risin' doctor, what they call a fiskiatrist or sompthing—a mind doctor—and when Erm was in the city he told him about it and this fisk—the doctor, that is—said Elmer had undoubtedly been killed by his own imagination, which was in a heated condition superinduced by an excess of alcohol. Said Elmer had caught this queer fish and slung him over his shoulder—fish *had* a string in its mouth, by the way—and started for the tavern to show his catch, and as he staggered along the road he got more and more boastful and braggy in his mind, and got thinkin' the fish was bigger and bigger—remember it was where he couldn't see it, on his back—and the more he thought, the bigger it grew, and the heavier it got, and finally it weighed him down and smashed him—accordin' to what Erm Finch told me his cousin told him. Maybe tried to bite him, too, as he fell, Erm said—there was queer marks on El-mer's neck, I remember. Well, as I said before, if Elmer had saw the fish it wouldn't have hurt him a mite, but bein' where the only way he could see it was with his mind——"

Old man Ketchum sat with his mouth gaping as the man from Longeddy went out and unhitched his team, so it was quite easy for me to take the wire cheese cover from his hand and cover up what was left of the cheese.

No one said anything and I began to blow out the lamps.

"Well," said old man Ketchum at last, "well, I'll be hornswoggled!"


"Elmer got thinkin' the fish was bigger and bigger—and the more he thought, the bigger it grew."

# The Mysterious Opossum

By D. LANGE.

IN the life of the opossum thirteen is a lucky number, because the young opossum spends its infancy in a baby incubator which is equipped for thirteen tiny guests, although the number actually in the incubator is probably always less than thirteen.

The opossum is in structure a unique mammal of North America. It has, however, several relatives in South America, and our only species must have come north long before the advent of man on the continent.

It belongs to the strange, ancient order of pouch bearing mammals, now found in large numbers only on the continent of Australia and some adjacent islands.

An adult opossum weighs about twelve pounds, but the young at birth are not bigger than baby mice. They are at once transferred to the pouch of the mother, where they attach themselves to the teats, and for about five weeks they are fed by the milk of the mother without leaving their safe and warm incubator.

After that time they begin to explore the outside world; but they do it on the back of the mother, clinging to her fur and with their tails coiled around their mother's tail, the mother presenting now a most curious aspect of a walking nursery.

How the opossum has survived to the present day and how it manages to keep its hold on life is one of the mysteries of nature.

Deer, elk, wolf, bear and raccoon, wildcat, lynx and panther have had their range much restricted; but the dull witted, slow and almost defenseless opossum is still found over much of its ancient range, which extends from New York to Texas and from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi and beyond.

It is, however, small enough to find shelter under stones and woodpiles, under roots and in hollow trees, and it eats everything that is edible. Bulbs and roots, eggs and young birds, and all kinds of fruit. Its fondness of the wild persimmons is proverbial. It has no aversion to fresh chicken, and it is a prolific breeder.

These points of strength on the score card of life must overbalance its weak points or the animal could not survive.

No other American animal has given rise to a proverb which every child understands. But of what benefit this strange trait of rolling itself up into a ball and playing dead can be to a creature like the opossum it is difficult to see.

Many insects when disturbed drop to the ground, and by playing dead they become invisible, but the opossum is too large to reap a like benefit. Dogs, boys and men are not deceived, nor is it likely that wolves, foxes and bears were ever fooled in this way. If the creature would only use its ability to run he very often could escape, but that is not his way. When overtaken and touched he rolls up, opens his mouth wide and allows himself to be killed.

Perhaps under conditions that have now passed away this strange habit was of benefit to the race, and it persists as a fixed instinct, although it is now fatal.